DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 809 FL 021 074

AUTHOR Huntley, Helen S.
TITLE Feedback Strategies in Intermediate and Advanced Second Language Composition. A Discussion of the Effects of Error Correction, Peer Review, and Student-Teacher Conferences on Student Writing and Performance.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English (Second Language); *Error Correction; *Feedback; *Peer Evaluation; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Student Conferences

ABSTRACT

In teaching second language composition, responding to and commenting on student writing consumes the largest portion of a teacher's time. The small amount of research that has been conducted on second-language composition has produced results that seem to call into question the whole spectrum of feedback, commenting on student writing and pointing out errors, which is the method most widely used for responding to student writing. A closer look at the research conducted into the feedback given to intermediate and advanced students in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) and second-language composition is presented to shed some light on the relationship between teacher's feedback strategies and their effects on student writing and performance. An examination of peer review and teacher conferences is discussed to call attention to possible alternatives or additions to the teacher's repertoire of feedback techniques. It is suggested that an inspection of the feedback strategies currently in use may indicate important ramifications for the whole field of second-language composition methodology. Although most of the research cited in this paper pertains to ESL composition, much of it will be relevant to the broader field of any second-language writing context. (VWL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED355809

Helen S. Huntley
OPIE, 212D Gordy Hall
Ohio University
Athens, OH 45701

FEEDBACK STRATEGIES IN INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED SECOND LANGUAGE COMPOSITION

A discussion of the effects of error correction, peer review, and student-teacher conferences on student writing and performance

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Helen S. Huntley

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

FL 021 074

 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FEEDBACK STRATEGIES IN INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED SECOND LANGUAGE COMPOSITION

More than any other activity in the teaching of second language composition, responding to and commenting on student writing consumes the largest proportion of teachers' time. Most teachers estimate that it takes them between 20 and 40 minutes to comment on and correct errors in each student paper, which is an enormous investment in time during the course of a semester for a class of 20 students, writing 4 to 8 papers each (Sommers 160). With so much time and effort directed to a single activity, it is important, therefore, to understand how worthwhile it is. The small amount of research that has so far been conducted in second language composition has produced results that seem to call into question the whole spectrum of feedback, since commenting on student writing and pointing out errors, the method most widely used for responding to student writing, also seems to be the most ineffective. A closer look at the research conducted into the feedback given to intermediate and advanced students in ESL and second language composition may shed some light on the relationship between teachers' feedback strategies and their effects on student writing and performance, and an examination of peer review and student-teacher conferences may call attention to possible alternatives or additions to the teacher's repertoire of feedback techniques. In addition, an inspection of the feedback strategies currently in use may indicate important ramifications for the whole field of second language composition methodology, in terms of attention paid primarily to the finished product or to the process of composing.

Although most of the research cited will pertain specifically to ESL composition, much of it will be relevant to the broader field of any second language writing context and should be evaluated accordingly.

Error Correction

Over the past decade, considerable attention has been given by researchers to the treatment of error in the written work of second language learners, but there is still little consensus, however, on how teachers can best react to student error, and at what stage in the composing process intervention should occur. In the classroom, teachers are still responding most frequently to mechanical errors, with very little attention being paid to actual content. In a study of writing in secondary schools, Applebee (1981) found that 80% of foreign language teachers ranked mechanical errors as the most important criterion for responding to student writing, a finding supported by Zamel (1985) in ESL writing. When she compared ESL and content teachers' feedback on the same samples of writing, Zamel found that language teachers focused primarily on mechanics, whereas teachers from other disciplines responded most frequently to the students' presentation of facts and concepts.

The five most widely used error correction techniques in ESL composition are described by Wingfield (1975) as follows:

a. The teacher gives sufficient clues to enable self-correction to be made.

b. The teacher corrects the script.

c. The teacher deals with errors through marginal comments and footnotes.

d. The teacher explains orally to individual students.

e. The teacher uses the error as an illustration for a class explanation.

Second language composition teachers generally use a combination of these techniques, taking into account such factors as the student's purpose or goals for communication in writing, and the student's writing proficiency in the target language at any given time, whilst concentrating more attention on errors that impair intelligibility or are of high frequency. Thus, the type and amount of feedback for an intermediate writer should not be the same as for an advanced writer, since the level of language proficiency requires that attention be focused on different problems.

However, second language composition teachers often provide feedback that is confusing, inconsistent, and vague, with the result that students tend to make the same mistakes repeatedly and take little notice of the corrections made. This view is supported by Cohen and Robbins (1977) who found that a close look at the effects of correction in written work revealed that correction was neither systematic nor enlightened enough to actually influence the production of errors. In addition, an experiment conducted by Marzano and Arthur (1977) verified the likelihood that papers will end up in the waste basket after having received only a cursory glance, and that the hours teachers spend correcting students' writing is an exercise in futility.

In the light of such criticism concerning the ineffectiveness of error correction procedures, Cardelle and Corno (1981) researched the effects on second language (Spanish) learning of variations in written feedback that either suppressed student errors or made them salient. It was found that written comments had a positive effect, that feedback variations which made errors salient

produced a higher level of achievement than feedback that suppressed errors, and that constructive feedback was motivationally more effective than critical feedback. The authors concluded that the findings support the notion that a major learning function can be served by written feedback that makes students' errors salient in a motivationally favorable way, and that praises the good points in the writing rather than highlighting only the errors. However, a study by Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) on the salience of feedback on error and its effect on EFL writing found, in contrast, that overt correction had no effect on writing quality, but that practice over time was more likely to account for any increases in writing proficiency. This view is supported by Briere's study on quantity before quality in second language composition, which indicated that an emphasis on quantity and fluency produces far better results than any emphasis on quality - which often serves to limit a student's fluency rather than encourage it. For this reason, many composition teachers ask students to write journals aimed at promoting fluency and content, rather than paying excessive attention to mechanical details. The increasing expertise in writing would then be a result of practice and self-confidence, as the writer progresses through the natural stages of language development - in which errors are predictable - to greater writing proficiency, without having suffered the negative effects of "the red pen," which only serves to retard the learning process by creating poor attitudes, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence.

The question of whether to address errors directly or indirectly has been addressed by several researchers. Lalande (1982) found that students who used an error code - a list of symbols to direct

self-correction - when revising their compositions, made significantly greater gains than a group whose compositions were corrected directly by the instructor. Additionally, Semke (1984) found that overt correction of student writing tended to have negative side effects on both the quality of subsequent compositions and on students' attitudes toward writing in the foreign language. It would appear, then, that learners retain feedback more effectively only if they are forced to approach error correction as a problem solving activity, rather than as a procedure already performed for them by the teacher, which tends to produce a negative response.

While much of the research on response to student writing has focused on the grammatical product, Sommers focuses on how students make use of the written feedback they receive in the process of revision by investigating what messages the teachers give the students through their comments, and which of these comments the students choose to use or ignore when revising. Sommers found that the teachers' comments can take students' attention away from their own purpose in writing a particular text and can alter the focus to writing what the teacher appears to want. The language of the comments often makes it difficult for a student to sort out and decide what is most important and what is least important, since most teachers' comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text. Furthermore, students are commanded to edit and develop at the same time, confusing process and product by commenting on first drafts as if the compositions were being graded without a final revision. Sommers suggests that teachers' comments need to offer reasons for revision that are text-specific and are not based on grammatical irregularities. Instead, teachers should

"force students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning" (166), to show them through their comments that new choices would positively change their texts and offer potential for writing development.

Sommers' exploration of teacher comments leads to an important question. At what stage should a teacher intervene in a student's writing, and what should be corrected? Traditionally, teachers have tended to focus on the product by viewing all corrections and comments as the final stage, the one on which grades are based. Surface errors have been addressed at the expense of content and meaning. The current interest in process writing, whereby writing through multiple drafts is seen as a way of discovering meaning, signifies that error correction in the early stages of drafting is redundant, since revision is likely to change the grammatical construction as well as the content of the writing. Attention to the coherence and communication of ideas is the primary focus of process writing, in which editing and attention to grammar occur only in the final draft. Since the results of research, contradictory as they may appear, suggest that highly-detailed feedback on sentence-level mechanics may not be worth the instructor's time and effort and does not seem to lead to improved student writing except where problem-solving strategies are employed, it appears that teachers may well spend their time more profitably by addressing more important communicative and meaningful aspects of student writing. In addition, teachers can employ alternate strategies to aid in the revision process, strategies which are student-centered rather than teacher-centered. Using peer review activities in the classroom and student-teacher conferences can reduce the need for the time-consuming correction

of students' essays, and offer a wider audience or a more personalized context for negotiation of meaning in second language composition.

Peer Review

The peer review process involves groups of students in the classroom reading and reviewing each others' writing, generally by means of a peer review questionnaire, which focuses the reviewer's attention on specific aspects of the author's writing. Comments may be delivered orally or in writing, the written comments often being assessed by the teacher, as well as the original piece of writing.

The rationale behind the peer review process relates to theoretical, practical, and affective factors in second language learning and composition. The theoretical basis lies in the nature of language, language use, and language learning, in which learning is seen as a social process since "learning to use language .... requires the particular feedback of human response, because it is to other people that language is directed" (Moffett 1968). Although the traditional approach to writing instruction of student-as-writer to teacher-as-reader provides one social audience, it has, heretofore, largely ignored the "powerful educative force" of peers who "approximate the [audience] most students must eventually write for in everyday life, in business, government and the professions" (Bruffee 642). In short, the social context created by peer interaction is more realistic, and therefore, more powerful.

According to Mittan (1989), there are several benefits to having peers involved in the reading of student writings. First, peer reviews provide student writers with reactions, questions, and responses from authentic readers, who provide a stronger motivation for revision and who tend to react honestly to lack

of clarity. Secondly, student writers receive more feedback from multiple and mutually reinforcing perspectives, which may assure student writers that they hear a balanced view. Thirdly, because they reciprocate in the role of audience for their peers, students gain a clearer understanding of meeting the reader's needs. At the same time, by responding critically to their colleagues' writing, students exercise the critical thinking they must apply to their own work. Fourthly, students see that their peers also have difficulty writing, and they may gain confidence in - or at least feel less apprehension about - their own abilities. Lastly, the teacher is released from the excessive work load of responding in detail to students' writing by decreasing the time spent on individual compositions, since the peer review process has eliminated some of the errors and problems that needed to be addressed.

Witbeck (1976) essentially reinforces Mittan's advocacy of peer review and, in addition, points out that correction of another student's errors may reinforce and sometimes expand the the understanding of the grammatical rule in question. Furthermore, students will see that errors in composition are in the nature of problems to be solved by all learners of the language rather than being individual weaknesses, and that errors are a necessary part of the process of learning rather than merely indications of failure to learn.

The peer review process may be intimidating, at first, to many second language learners, since they have traditionally been carefully shielded from seeing or reading each other's writing. Reassurance and guidance from the teacher may be necessary, initially, to structure the process towards the four principal tasks of

peer review: offering a positive response to the writing, identifying the purpose of the writing, asking questions directed toward the writer, and offering suggestions for change to the writer. As the students become more skilful and critical in assessing each other's writing, Moore (1986) observes that "not only are [students] able to criticize both positively and negatively, but also they become increasingly adept at pinpointing a problem and even suggesting how to improve something" (23).

The effectiveness of peer review may be influenced by the group size and by the level of writing proficiency within the group. While Moore advocates arranging students in groups of four, Mittan prefers the intimacy of pairs of students whose proficiency level differs slightly, but is not exactly the same. Pairings of low-low and low-high, for example, are generally ineffective, because the low-low students may be too inexpert to be discriminating, while the low-high is too unbalanced. In addition, pairing students from the same language background is not necessarily undesireable, since they may be able to gain insight about their own problems by seeing them mirrored in their partner's writing.

Peer review, then, seems to offer the language teacher a valuable alternative to traditional feedback methods, by allowing class peers to assess and improve each other's work, and in so doing, become more critical of their own performance. After an initial period of adjustment, students tend to react favorably to the review process, to feel less anxiety, to interact better with their classmates, and to worry less about making errors, since the first person to see them will be the peer reviewer rather than an all-knowing teacher. In addition to gaining insights

from each other's writing, students are better able to appreciate the concept of audience, which is no longer defined by the teacher, but by a more authentic group of readers who are on more or less the same level as the writer. Both affectively and cognitively, then, peer review can be an asset to the second language composition classroom.

Student-Teacher Writing Conferences

Dissatisfaction with teaching by means of comments written in the margins of students' papers, which may be misunderstood, misread, or totally ignored by the students receiving them, has led some ESL and second language teachers to turn to the conference as a practical format for the effective delivery of individual instruction for the purpose of mutual discussion about the writing process in general, and the strengths and weaknesses of the student's own paper in particular. Because of its format, the conference is seen as a teaching method that fosters active participation by the student and that allows the teacher to see exactly what the student does and does not understand.

Most of the research associated with student conferences has been conducted with native writers and has pointed to substantial evidence that the writing conference is a particularly effective setting for the development of a student's ability to reflect critically on his or her own work, its content, and the cognitive processes involved in producing the writing. In addition, Freedman (1981) found that the dialogue exchanged in the conference allows students to express their own concerns and thereby participate more actively in the evaluation. Carnicelli (1980) concluded that conferences are a more effective means of feedback than are written comments, because conferences allow students to express

their opinions and needs, and to clarify teachers' comments when they are not understood. Zamel (1985) reached a similar conclusion with non-native speakers after finding that ESL students often found written comments difficult to understand. She suggests, instead, that teachers need to hold conferences with students because "dynamic interchange and negotiation is most likely to take place when writers and readers work together face-to-face" (97).

In a study by Goldstein and Conrad (1990) investigating student input and negotiation of meaning in ESL writing conferences, it was found that some of the claims made for conferences involving native speakers were not supported in an ESL context. While much of the literature suggests that the very act of conferencing leads students to contribute input by setting the agenda, making their needs known, expressing their ideas and opinions, and asking questions, Golstein and Conrad's study indicated considerable variation in the way in which ESL students interact with the teacher in a conference. Since ESL students, as members of diverse cultures, come with rules of speaking that may conflict with those of U.S. classrooms and with those teachers might like to see operate in conferences and may also have acquired rules of speaking from typical U.S. classrooms, in which the teacher initiates a question and the student responds, they may be lacking in interpersonal conferencing skills. Additionally, Goldstein and Conrad found that conferences do not necessarily result in revision, and even when it does occur, it is not always successful. It was hypothetised that students only negotiate points where they most clearly see the need for revision, and tend to ignore others equally worthy of reconstruction. Despite these drawbacks, the study suggested, overall, that negotiation did play an important

role, but that it was dependent on personality and a myriad of cultural and individual characteristics. However, since this study involved only 3 students of different cultural backgrounds, it is difficult to make sweeping claims or repudiations toward the relationship of ESL conferences with the overwhelmingly positively rated conferences of native speakers.

It is evident that a great deal more research needs to be carried out with an ESL population to investigate the effect of student characteristics, cultural background, and teachers' interactional ability in the student-teacher conference. In the meantime, teachers must depend on their own intuition for what works and what does not work with a particular population of ESL or second language learners. The students, themselves, generally perceive conferencing as a positive motivational and interactional activity, a chance rarely given in most classrooms for individual attention from the teacher. Inevitably, some will feel more comfortable and be more successful with revisions than others. It is for the individual teacher, then, to justify the considerable amount of time expended in student conferencing by evaluating the results conferences are perceived to bring about. It is probably unrealistic to expect that every student essay will generate a conference, but for many teachers and students, conferencing is a valuable tool for occasional use.

Summary

While waiting for research on second language learning to provide more information on the issues surrounding feedback in composition, teachers will need to continue experimenting with different strategies in their classrooms. What works for one teacher and one set of students may not necessarily be equally

effective for the same or another teacher with a different set of students. Nevertheless, based on current language learning theory and research, as well as on practical experience, it seems that students would benefit from a variety of feedback techniques aimed at improving content and organization first, and correcting grammatical errors and syntax second. In this way, second language writers may come to appreciate that revising may mean deleting and adding words, sentences,and paragraphs,as well as the editing and proofreading of existing content, with which revision has traditionally been synonymous. Moreover, instead of launching the traditional attack with the red pen on students' writing, teachers need to be aware of the positive affective and cognitive feedback that can be generated by peer review and student-teacher conferences, strategies that in the long run could save both students and teachers much time and effort, and provide superior results.

WORKS CITED

Applebee, A.N. (1981). Writing in the secondary school. (NCTE Research Rep. No 21). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Briere, Eugene J. (1976). Quantity before quality in second language composition. Language Learning, 17, 141-151.

Bruffee, K.A. (1984). Collaborative learning and the "conversation of mankind." College English, 46, 635-652.

Cardelle, Maria & Como, Lyn. (1981). Effects on second language learning of variations in written feedback on homework assignments. TESOL Quarterly, 15(3), 251-261.

Carnicelli, T.A. (1980). The writing conference: A one-to-one conversation. In T.R. Donovan & B.W. McClelland (Eds.), Eight approaches to teaching composition, 101-131. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Cohen, Andrew D. & Robbins, Margaret. (1977). Toward assessing interlanguage performance: The relationship between selected errors, learners' characteristics, and learners' explanations. Language Learning, 27, 45-61.

Freedman, S.W. (1981). Evaluation in the writing conference: An interactive process. In M.C. Hairston & C.L. Selfe (Eds.), Selected papers from the 1981 Texas Writing Research Conference (pp65-96). Austin: The University of Texas at Austin.

Goldstein, Lynn M. & Conrad, Susan M. (1990). Student input and negotiation of meaning in ESL writing conferences. TESOL Quarterly, 24(3), 443-460.

Hendrickson, James M. (1984). The treatment of error in written work. In Sandra McKay (Ed.) Composing in a second language, 145-59. Cambridge: Newbury House.

Lalande, J.F. (1982). Reducing composition errors: An experiment. Modern Language Journal, 66, 140-149.

WORKS CITED cont:

Marzano, Robert J. & Arthur, Sandra. (1977). Teacher comments on student essays: It doesn't matter what you say. A study prepared at the University of Colorado at Denver. ERIC ED 147 864.

Mittan, Robert. (1989). The peer review process: Harnessing students' communicative power. In Donna M. Johnson (Ed.) Richness in writing: Empowering ESL students, 207-219.

Moffett, J. (1968). Teaching the universe of discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Moore, L.K. (1986). Teaching students how to evaluate writing. TESOL Newsletter, 20(5), 23-24.

Robb, Thomas, Ross, steven < Shortreed, Ian. (1986). Salience of feedback on error and its effect on EFL writing quality. TESOL Quarterly, 20(1), 83-93.

Semke, H.D. (1984). The effects of the red pen. Foreign Language Annals, 17, 195-202.

Sommers, Nancy. Responding to student writing. In Sandra McKay (Ed.) Composing in a second language, 160-169. Cambridge: Newbury House.

Thompson, Mary. (1965). Writing in an audio-visual modern language program. The Teachers' Handbook. New York: Harcourt, Brace.

Walker, Carolyn P. & Elias, David. (1987). Writing conference talk: Factors associated with high and low-rated writing conferences. Research in the Teaching of English, 21(3), 266-283.

Wingfield, R.J. (1975). Five ways of dealing with errors in written composition. English Language Teaching Journal, 29, 311-313.

Witbeck, Michael C. (1976). Peer correction procedures for intermediate and advanced ESL composition lessons. TESOL Quarterly, 10(3), 321-326.

WORKS CITED cont:

Zamel, V. (1985). Responding to student writing. TESOL Quarterly, 19, 79-101.

Zamel, V. (1987). Writing: The process of discovering meaning. In Michael H. Long & Jack C. Richards Methodology in TESOL, 267-278. New York: Newbury House.